

# Easy Arabic Grammar

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Easy Arabic Script, *Jane Wightwick and Mahmoud Gaafar*

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# Introduction

## What is Arabic 'grammar'?

Arabic 'grammar' will mean different things to different people.

To learners of Arabic as a foreign language it might mean the fundamentals of the language: whether there are genders, whether the noun or the adjective comes first, how the verb changes in the past and future, etc.

To more advanced Arabists and scholars it might mean the higher-level subtleties of Modern Standard or Classical Arabic.

To native speakers, it usually conjures up a subject studied at school, often hazily remembered lessons analysing sentences with a view to being able to spell and pronounce formal Arabic correctly.

What this book means by 'grammar' is a progressive knowledge of the structure of Arabic from the basic building blocks to some, but by no means all, of the more subtle nuances of Modern Standard Arabic.

## Levels of formality

Learners of Arabic generally appreciate the difference between the various spoken Arabic dialects and the universal Modern Standard Arabic. What is not so well understood is that Modern Standard itself can be spoken and written at different levels of sophistication.

Although most Arabs can communicate in a form of standard Arabic and are aware that formal Arabic is pronounced with additional case endings, only scholars, media presenters and public speakers use these endings routinely.

This book includes **Case Notes** sections with additional explanations and activities covering the grammatical case

endings used in formal, literary and religious Arabic. These grammatical cases are similar to those found in languages such as German or Russian, but in Arabic are not usually pronounced in less formal contexts. You can use the book without reference to the **Case Notes** if you wish initially to acquire a more general understanding. Alternatively, you can study the **Case Notes** sections if you have an interest in this aspect of Arabic grammar and want to learn about it from the beginning.

## How to use this book

This is a reference and activity book for all beginners and early intermediate students of Arabic, whether studying in a group or by themselves. The book can also be used independently to improve understanding of the basics of grammar or to gain an overview of the structure of the Arabic language.

The book has a built-in progression. Explanations and activities draw only on structures already covered in previous units. Work your way through the units and measure your progress step by step. Alternatively, if you are already studying Arabic you can use the relevant part of the book for extra practice on a particular point of grammar.

The main part of the book is divided into 20 units, each concentrating on an aspect of Arabic grammar. The units feature:

- clear structural explanations
- more than 100 stimulating activities to practise particular grammar points
- optional **Case Notes** explaining formal case endings (see above)
- end-of-unit **In Summary**, highlighting the most important points of the unit for easy reference.

Answers to all the activities are also included in the final section of the book.

## Arabic script

It is beneficial to acquire familiarity with the Arabic script and the short vowel marks before studying this book. However, the complete alphabet is provided here for reference.

<i>final</i>	<i>medial</i>	<i>initial</i>	<i>isolated</i>	<i>letter</i>
ا	ا	ا	ا	ألف alif
ب	ب	ب	ب	باء bā'
ت	ت	ت	ت	تاء tā'
ث	ث	ث	ث	ثاء thā'
ج	ج	ج	ج	جيم jīm
ح	ح	ح	ح	حاء ḥā'
خ	خ	خ	خ	خاء khā'
د	د	د	د	دال dāl
ذ	ذ	ذ	ذ	ذال dhāl
ر	ر	ر	ر	راء rā'
ز	ز	ز	ز	زاي zāy
س	س	س	س	سين sīn
ش	ش	ش	ش	شين shīn
ص	ص	ص	ص	صاد ṣād
ض	ض	ض	ض	ضاد ḍād
ط	ط	ط	ط	طاء ṭā'
ظ	ظ	ظ	ظ	ظاء ṣā'

<i>final</i>	<i>medial</i>	<i>initial</i>	<i>isolated</i>	<i>letter</i>
ع	ع	ع	ع	عين ayin
غ	غ	غ	غ	ghayn
ف	ف	ف	ف	فاء fā'
ق	ق	ق	ق	قاف qāf
ك	ك	ك	ك	كاف kāf
ل	ل	ل	ل	لام lām
م	م	م	م	ميم mīm
ن	ن	ن	ن	نون nūn
ه	ه	ه	ه	هاء ḥā'
و	و	و	و	واو wāw
ي	ي	ي	ي	ياء yā'
فتحة fatha	a dash above the letter, pronounced as a short 'a' after the letter, e.g. ...بـ ba			
ضمّة damma	a comma-shape above, pronounced as a short 'u' after the letter, e.g. ...بـ bu			
كسرة kasra	a dash below, pronounced as a short 'i' after the letter, e.g. ...بـ bi			
سكون sukūn	a small circle above showing that <i>no vowel</i> follows the letter, e.g. بنت bint (girl)			
شدة shadda	a small 'w' shape above showing that the letter is <i>doubled</i> , e.g. بُن bunn (coffee beans)			
مدّة madda	a wavy symbol written over an alif and pronounced ā, e.g. آنسة ānisa (young woman)			

(Note: These symbols are not generally included in modern written Arabic. This book uses them where necessary for clarity.)

part

1

# Fundamentals of Arabic grammar

# The Arabic root system

Arabic is a language based on a system of 'roots'. In English, we often refer to the 'root' of a word to mean its origin, for example the root of the English word 'engineer' is the Latin *ingenium*, meaning 'skill'.

The Arabic root, or مصدر *maṣdar*, refers to the core meaning of a word. This core can usually be identified by three root consonants (non-vowels). For example, the sequence of three consonants س/ف/ر *s/f/r* (in this order, reading the Arabic script right to left) carries the meaning of 'travel'. A word which includes the sequence of letter س/ف/ر *s/f/r* is likely to have something to do with travelling. For example:

journey	سَفَر <i>safar</i>
he travels	يُسَافِر <i>yusāfir</i>
ambassador	سَفِير <i>safīr</i>
traveller	مُسَافِر <i>musāfir</i>
embassy	سِفَارَة <i>sifāra</i>

All these words are derived from the root س/ف/ر *s/f/r*. Notice how the root letters always appear in the same order. Any additional consonants or vowels before, after or between the root letters modify the meaning according to different general patterns. The feminine ending ة (*tā' marbūṭa*) is never part of the root and the most common additional consonants are م *m*, ت *t* and س *s*.

The emphasis on root consonants means that vowels, especially short vowels, are of secondary importance. The pronunciation often varies between Modern Standard Arabic and spoken dialects. For example, يكتب ('he writes') would be pronounced yaktub in Modern Standard, but could be yuktub or yiktib in dialect. The meaning is generally conveyed by the consonants rather than the vowels.

Much of Arabic grammar is concerned with how the root is manipulated to create different related meanings. As you become more familiar with the patterns and structures, you will be more able to identify the roots and to manipulate them yourself.

## Activity 1

Can you identify the three root letters in each of the following sets of words? What do you think the general core meaning could be?

1	book	كِتَاب <i>kitāb</i>
	office	مَكْتَب <i>maktab</i>
	writer/clerk	كَاتِب <i>kātib</i>
	library	مَكْتَبَة <i>maktaba</i>
2	lesson	دَرَس <i>dars</i>
	teacher	مُدَرِّس <i>mudarris</i>
	study	دِرَاسَة <i>dirāsa</i>
	school	مَدْرَسَة <i>madrasa</i>

3	broken	مكسور maksūr
	fragmentation	تكسير taksīr
	it was broken	انكسر inkasar
	nut cracker	كسارة kassāra
4	player	لاعب lāʿib
	playing field	ملعب malʿab
	toy	لعبة luʿba
	games	ألعاب alʿāb

### Words with doubled root letter

Some Arabic words have the same second and third root letters. When this is the case, they are sometimes written together with a shadda doubling sign (ّ) and sometimes separately, depending on the type of word:

جديد jadīd (new) = root letters ج/د/د j/d/d

كل kull (all) = root letters ك/ل/ل k/l/l

### Words with four root letters

A few Arabic words have four root letters. Sometimes these are four different letters, for example ترجمة tarjama (translation), where the root letters are ت/ر/ج/م t/r/j/m, but often they are a repeated pair, for example زلزال zalzāl (earthquake), where the root letters are ز/ل/ز/ل z/l/z/l.

### Words of foreign origin

Generally loan words such as راديو rādyū (radio) or انترنت intarnat (internet) fall outside the Arabic root system.



### In summary

- Most Arabic words have a sequence of three root consonants which is connected with a particular core meaning.
- Vowels and consonants are added around the root to create related words and structures.
- The most common additional consonants are م m, س s and ت t.
- Some words have the same second and third root consonants and a few have four root consonants.
- Roots are the building blocks of the Arabic language and are helpful for guessing the meaning of vocabulary.



# Gender: masculine and feminine

Arabic nouns (words that name people, objects or ideas) are either *masculine* مُذَكَّر (mudhakkar) or *feminine* مُؤنَّث (mu'annath).

chair (*masculine*) كُرْسِي kursī

table (*feminine*) مَائِدَة mā'ida

It is not difficult to tell the difference between masculine and feminine words. Feminine words usually fall into one of two categories:

1 Words with the feminine ending ة a (tā' marbūṭa), for example:

car سَيَّارَة sayyāra

bag حَقِيْبَة ḥaqība

aunt (*maternal*) خَالَة khāla

nurse (*female*) مُمَرِّضَة mumarriḍa

2 Words referring to female people but not ending in ة a, for example:

girl بِنْت bint

mother أُم umm

Gender: masculine and feminine

In addition, there are a small number of words which are feminine and don't fit into either of the two feminine categories. Most of these are names of countries, natural features or parts of the body that come in pairs, for example:

leg	رجل rijl
sun	شَمْس shams
desert	صَحْرَاء ṣaḥrā'
Egypt	مِصْر miṣr

## Activity 1

Decide if these words are مُذَكَّر mudhakkar or مُؤنَّث mu'annath and tick the correct box, as in the example:

			مُذَكَّر	مُؤنَّث
1	كِتَاب kitāb	book	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	أَخْت ukht	sister	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	بَيْت bayt	house	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	قَمِيص qamīṣ	shirt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	دَجَاجَة dajāja	chicken	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	أَب ab	father	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	وَلَد walad	boy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	العِرَاق al-irāq	Iraq	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	شَارِع shāriʿ	street	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	صُورَة ṣūra	picture	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	عَيْن ayn	eye	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	اجْتِمَاع ijtimāʿ	meeting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Case Notes

Arabic has different levels of formality and complexity. In certain contexts, particularly Quranic or Classical Arabic but also sometimes in more formal Standard Arabic, you will see and hear additional grammatical endings. These endings represent the *case* of the noun (*nominative*, *accusative* or *genitive*) and whether it is *definite* or *indefinite*. The endings change depending on the function of the noun in a sentence.

Isolated nouns are usually shown with the neutral تنوين (tanwīn) ending showing they are *indefinite* ('a/an'). تنوين (tanwīn) literally means 'putting a nūn on' and for this reason is sometimes called *nunation*. It is written as a small symbol above the final letter (ـ) and pronounced *un*:

a boy                      ولد\* waladun

a girl                      بنت\* bintun

If a noun ends in ة (tā' marbūṭa), the *t* is pronounced before the تنوين (tanwīn):

a car                      سيارة\* sayyāratun

a nurse                      ممرضة\* mumarriḍatun

تنوين (tanwīn) is not normally added to foreign loan words such as كمبيوتر kumbyūtir (computer).

## Optional Activity

Put the تنوين (tanwīn) on these nouns and say them out loud.

1 قميص                      4 صورة

2 دجاجة                      5 سيارة

3 بيت                      6 عين



## In summary

- Arabic has two genders: *masculine* and *feminine*.
- Most feminine nouns end in ة (tā marbūṭa) or, if not, they refer to female people, e.g. بنت (bint).
- Other nouns are generally masculine.
- In more formal Standard and Classical Arabic additional grammatical endings may be seen and heard on Arabic nouns.

# 3 ال al- (the)

Arabic has no separate word for 'a' or 'an', as in 'a chair' or 'an apple'. So **كِتَاب** (kitāb) means 'a book', **مَكْتَب** (maktab) 'an office', etc.

To make a noun *definite* ('the book', 'the office', etc.), you need to add **ال** (al-) meaning 'the'. **ال** (al-) is written *joined* to the word it refers to and is the same for both masculine and feminine:

وَلَد walad (a boy) → **الولد** al-walad (the boy)

بِنْت bint (a girl) → **البنت** al-bint (the girl)

قَمِيص qamīṣ (a shirt) → **القميص** al-qamīṣ (the shirt)

حَقِيْبَة ḥaqība (a bag) → **الحقيبة** al-ḥaqība (the bag)

## Sun letters الحروف الشمسية and moon letters الحروف القمرية

Nouns starting with certain letters of the Arabic alphabet cause the pronunciation of **ال** (al-) to change. The 'l' is assimilated and instead the initial letter of the noun is pronounced twice – and written with a shadda (ّ) if the vowel marks are included:

سَيَّارَة sayyāra (a car) → **السَّيَّارَة** as-sayyāra (the car)

نَهْر nahr (a river) → **النَّهْر** an-nahr (the river)

ال al- (the)

The letters which cause this pronunciation assimilation are called 'sun letters', **الحروف الشمسية** (al-ḥurūf ash-shamsiyya), as **ش** (shīn) is itself an assimilating letter. Note that *only* the pronunciation is affected by sun letters. The spelling of **ال** (al-) doesn't change. Half the 28 letters of the alphabet are sun letters.

The remainder of the letters are called **الحروف القمرية** (al-ḥurūf al-qamriyya), as **ق** (qāf) is not an assimilating letter.

**الحروف الشمسية** (sun letters):

ت ث د ذ ر ز س ش ص ض ط ظ ل ن

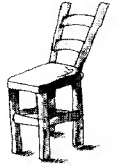
**الحروف القمرية** (moon letters):

ا ب ج ح خ ع غ ف ق ك م ه و ي

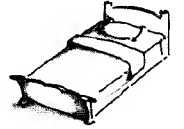
### Activity 1

Write these nouns with the article **ال** (al-) and then say them out loud, as in the examples.

كرسي الكرسي (al-kursī)



سرير السرير (as-sarīr)



مفتاح



دجاجة



قَلَم



3

بَيْت



4

صُورَة



5

مَمْرُضَة



6

تِين



7

خَيْمَة



8

### Elision

If ال (al-) comes directly after a vowel, the 'a' of ال (al-) will drop out, or elide, leaving just the 'l'. Again, this affects only the pronunciation and not the spelling:

البيت al-bayt  
(the house)

في البيت fi l-bayt  
(in the house)

المرضة الممرضة al-mumarrida (the nurse) هي الممرضة hiya l-mumarrida (she [is] the nurse)

### Case Notes

When a noun is made definite (for example, by adding ال al-), the neutral (*nominative*) case ending above the final letter becomes a ḍamma (ُ) pronounced -u (-tu if the noun ends in ṭ):

a boy ولدٌ waladun the boy الولدُ al-waladu

a car سَيَّارَةٌ sayyāratun the car السَيَّارَةُ as-sayyāratu

### Optional Activity

Put the definite neutral case ending on the answers you gave for Activity 1 and say the words out loud. For example:

المفتاحُ al-miftāḥu (the key)



### In summary

- ال (al-) is the Arabic equivalent of 'the' and is always written joined to the following noun: بيت bayt (house); البيت al-bayt (the house).
- There is no separate word equivalent to 'a/an'.
- Half the letters of the Arabic alphabet assimilate the 'l' of 'al-': التين at-tīn (the figs).
- The 'a' of 'al-' is not pronounced if the previous word ends in a vowel: في البيت fi l-bayt (in the house).

# Pronouns (singular) and non-verbal sentences

Pronouns are words such as 'I', 'it' or 'you' which replace names or nouns in a sentence.

Arabic has more pronouns than English since it has different versions for masculine and feminine, singular and plural, and even special *dual* pronouns for two people or things.

## Singular pronouns

Here are the singular pronouns.

I	أنا	anā
you (masculine)	أنتَ	anta
you (feminine)	أنتِ	anti
he, it (masculine)	هُوَ	huwa
she, it (feminine)	هِيَ	hiya

## Activity 1

Cover the pronouns above and then join the Arabic to the English, as in the example.

he, it (masculine)	أنتَ
I	أنا
she, it (feminine)	هُوَ
you (masculine)	هِيَ
you (feminine)	أنتِ

## Non-verbal sentences

You can construct non-verbal sentences in Arabic that do not require the equivalent of 'am', 'are' or 'is'. The subject, either a noun or a pronoun, can be followed directly by the rest of the sentence:

I [am] Yasmin. أنا ياسمين.  
ana yasmīn.

Yousef [is a] teacher. يوسف مُدَرِّس.  
yūsaf mudarris.

My aunt Nadia [is a] nurse. خالتي نادية مُمَرِّضة.  
khālatī nādyā mumarriḍa.

The dog [is] in the garden. الكلب في الحديقة.  
al-kalb fī l-ḥadīqa.

You [are] Ahmed's father. أنتَ أبو أحمد.  
anta abū aḥmad.

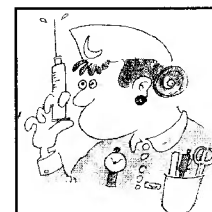
## Activity 2

Fill in the gaps, as in the example.



أمّ سارة.

3



هي 5



1 أحمد مدرّس.



4 أنا في

### Activity 3

Write out these sentences again using هو or هي, as in the example.

هو مدرّس.

1 أحمد مدرّس.

2 ياسمين ممرضة.

3 الكلب في الشارع.

4 السيارة في الشارع.

5 الولد في الحديقة.

6 البنت في السيارة.



### In summary

- هو huwa means *he* or *it* for masculine nouns; هي hiya means *she* or *it* for feminine nouns.
- There are masculine and feminine forms of 'you': أنت anta (*masculine*) and أنت anti (*feminine*).
- There is no direct equivalent of 'is', 'am' or 'are' (verb 'to be' in the present).
- Sentences can be formed without the verb 'to be': هو مدرّس huwa mudarris (He [is a] teacher).

### Case Notes

Look at these non-verbal sentences with the case endings included:

He's a teacher. هو مدرّس. huwa mudarrisun

You're a nurse. أنت ممرضة. anti mumarridatun

The girl is in the house. البنت في البيت. al-bintu fī l-bayti

All of the case endings in italics are neutral, or *nominative* – *-un* for indefinite and *-u* for definite – except البيت where the ending changes to *-i* after في fī (in). You will learn more about this in Unit 8. For the moment, it is enough to know that the case ending will be *nominative* unless there is a reason for it *not* to be.

# Plurals and plural pronouns

Many aspects of elementary Arabic grammar are straightforward, but plurals require explanation and practice.

The first point to make is that Arabic plurals refer only to three or more people or items. For two people or items, there is a separate dual form, although this is not always used in less formal Arabic. The dual form is covered separately in Unit 13.

## Plural pronouns

In addition to the singular pronouns, there are also five plural pronouns:

we	نَحْنُ naḥnu
you (masculine plural)	أَنْتُمْ antum
you (feminine plural)	أَنْتُنَّ antunna
they (masculine)	هُمْ hum
they (feminine)	هُنَّ hunna

Although there are separate masculine and feminine plural forms of 'you' and 'they', the masculine is the most common. If a group of people is mixed male and female, the masculine form is used. The group must be entirely female for the feminine plural to be used. (Spoken dialects sometimes ignore even this difference and use the masculine form throughout.)

## Plural nouns: introduction

Arabic nouns can be made plural in one of two ways:

- By adding a *suffix* (ending) to the singular noun, similar to the way English adds '-s' to 'tree' to produce 'trees' or '-es' to 'box' to produce 'boxes'. This is called the *sound plural* (al-jamع as-sālim الجمع السالم).
- By changing the internal vowels of the singular word, similar to the way English turns 'mouse' into 'mice' or 'man' into 'men'. This is called the *broken plural* (jamع at-taksīr جمع التكسير).

However, whereas 'mouse/mice' is the exception in English, the broken plural is common in Arabic and accounts for the majority of plurals, particularly of basic words.

The simpler sound plural will be covered in this unit and the broken plural in Unit 11.

## Sound plurals

There are two sound plurals, formed by adding external suffixes:

- *sound masculine plural*
- *sound feminine plural*

### Sound masculine plural

The sound masculine plural is formed by adding *ون* -ūn or *ين* -īn to the singular noun:

مدرس mudarris → مدرّسون mudarrisūn / مدرّسين mudarrisīn  
(male teacher) (teachers)

The alternative *ين* -īn ending is used in particular structures which will be explained later in this book.

The sound masculine plural (SMP) is used almost exclusively with words describing groups of males or mixed males and females, for example when referring to jobs and nationalities:

محاسب muḥāsib → محاسبون muḥāsibūn / محاسبين muḥāsibīn  
(accountant) (accountants)

عراقي irāqīy → عراقيون irāqīyūn / عراقيين irāqīyīn  
(Iraqi) (Iraqis)